

Five Academic Challenges of Chinese International Students in U.S Higher Education: Educational System Adjustment and Classroom Transition

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Abstract. Recent years have witnessed a growing mobility of Chinese international students into the U.S higher education institutions, however, many scholars suggested that international Chinese students were inclined to think it was challenging for them to adapt to the college education in the U.S. While pursuing higher education and academic careers in the U.S continuously being an irresistible trend of Chinese society, there have been increasing attentions to the major academic challenges of international Chinese students in the American educational system adjustment and classroom transition. Drawing on what literature exists combined with research addressing Chinese international students' adjustments with educational system and classroom management, this article examines the five major academic challenges of Chinese students studying in U.S colleges: 1) language barriers; 2) critical thinking skills; 3) in-class participation; 4) teamwork and cooperation; 5) understand new academic expectation and goals. This article focuses on discussing and analyzing the deep reasons of the five academic challenges for Chinese international students, which brought by Chinese traditional culture and the students' previous learning experiences in China. Through recognizing and understanding about the major difficulties of Chinese students as well as the reasons behind them, U.S institutions of higher learning are able to provide useful strategies and particle policies to assist Chinese international students successfully overcome the challenges and make the adjustment in a new educational environment.

Keywords: Chinese international students; Academic challenges; U.S higher education; College adjustment.

1. Introduction

According to the available data, "colleges and universities in the United States are a popular study destination for Chinese students, with over 317 thousand choosing to take courses there in the 2020/21 academic year" [1]. "Although numbers were heavily affected by the coronavirus pandemic, China is still the leading source of international students in the U.S. education market" [1]. The large number and high proportion have brought people ongoing attention to the major academic challenges which Chinese international students faced in educational system adjustment and classroom transition. In one qualitative inquiry which examined the most challenging factors of Chinese international students' experiences and lives in U.S colleges, the level of "academic stress" was identified exceedingly high for the most participants [2]. There are many articles also revealed that there were five major challenges confronted by Chinese international students: 1) "relearning new language skills and communication styles"; 2) cultivating critical thinking skills; 3) participating classroom discussions and activities; 4) teamwork and cooperation; 5) understand new academic expectation and educational goals [3, 4, 5]. The following passage will mainly focus on the introduction of the problems from the above five aspects.

To start, a number of the articles on this topic have emphasized that "English language proficiency is vital to the success of international students in American higher education because both the academic and social adjustment of international students require a high level of English language skills" [6]. However, it is reported that because of English language barriers, the international students from China face difficulties so as to pursue their academic goals and success in American higher education institutions [6]. On account of language difficulties in English, students reported that

vocabulary, “lack of contextual knowledge or cultural background, and inadequate language training were the most significant factors” [7]. Critical thinking skills, including excogitating creative ideas and making reflective judgements, have become the second challenge of international students from China. In the U.S collages, the deficiency of Chinese international students’ critical thinking skills emerged in different ways. For example, many college instructors in the U.S would encourage the student to be “more critical” by asking more questions while the Chinese educational experiences of the students failed to nurture this inquisitive habit compared to Western universities [8]. Then, researchers have found that “students learn best when they are actively involved in class discussions and activities, and they appear more satisfied with their classes” [9]. However, negative participation in class discussions and inactive involvement in class activities are considered as significant challenges faced by Chinese international students. There are many cultural aspects that affect Chinese students' class engagements in American colleges [10]. For instance, students from China mentioned that “they question the value of a professorial focus on discussion rather than lecture and they query the professor's failure to follow the textbook” [10]. In addition to the three academic difficulties already mentioned: language barriers, thinking differences, and class involvement, Chinese students in American higher educational institutions also have difficulties in cooperating with other classmates in group works and projects. They “feel there is too much emphasis on group works”, and they share no common interests with their American counterparts [10]. On top of that, it is suggested that “American college students are more inclined toward cooperation, whereas their Chinese counterparts rely more on competition” [11]. Finally, it is an arduous task for Chinese students to understand new academic expectations and educational goals in American universities. It suggested that Chinese international students tend to “consider their local Chinese professors to be more effective in teaching and they have higher expectation of Chinese students than the U.S. professors” [12]. As many literatures pointed out, “the degree of centralization and control of educational programs in the two countries is seen as the major difference in educational structures, resulting in new demands on Chinese students' sense of responsibility, initiative, and independence” [13].

Based on the above discussion, there are five major academic challenges that Chinese international students faced when receiving higher education in the U.S institutions, which are language barriers, critical thinking skills, in-class participation, teamwork and cooperation, and new academic expectations. Recognizing and analyzing the major academic challenges of Chinese international students have encountered is significant in helping future students to be better prepared for the challenges and transitions they will face in the U.S colleges. However, these problems have not yet formed a comprehensive and systematic understanding, so this paper will focus on analyzing the problems from the five aspects, so as to form a systematic understanding.

2. Analysis of the five major academic challenges

2.1 Language barriers

“Language barriers and communication problems” were recognized as prominent stressors by a majority of Chinese international students in overseas colleges [7]. A survey demonstrated that “only 25% of the respondents considered themselves “excellent” in keeping up with the ability of following the course, 40% respondents reckoned they faced difficulties when communicating with their teachers, and 45% said lack of English proficiency restricted them progressing in their courses; 50% of the students said they found it hard to meet the required standard of English to follow the undertaken courses, 40~45% said their overall education and grades were affected by language barriers, and 30% of the students switched from their main courses to English language courses” [14]. From the survey’s data, it is not difficult to conclude that language barriers made negative impacts on Chinese students’ academic performance in colleges. In fact, many studies have confirmed that a lack of English proficiency is an impediment factor for most international Chinese students, which tends to be the most significant obstacle during their process of adaption to the academic environment in the U.S [7].

In terms of the main elements responsible for the language difficulties in English, Chinese international students reported that “vocabulary”, “the lack of contextual knowledge or cultural background, and inadequate language training” were the most influential components [7]. In American higher education, academic reading is an essential part. A number of articles and other reading materials would be assigned to students as course preparation before lectures. For Chinese international students with difficulties of vocabularies, however, they would struggle with reading the articles with unfamiliar words.

It should be noted that “comprehension relies not only on vocabulary but also on the understanding of the context” [15]. Therefore, language learning tends to be a more sophisticated procedure for the international students when it includes unconversant contextual information. Sometimes, even they know every single word in a sentence, the sentence as a whole still doesn't make sense to them because of their limited contextual knowledge [15]. In fact, cultural background knowledge of the U.S plays a much more important role in specific courses like American history, politics, and sociology. These courses are usually required by college general education. For international students, the shortage of cultural background made the course content arcane. Dalya talked about how difficult it was to memorize all the English names of scholars and policies, as well as the “common sense” that are new to international students in the social policy class: “I feel a little bit struggled right now, because we talk about the government a lot, like the three branches of government...I can't even remember right now. They think that's common sense, but for international students, we have to look it up, trying to learn from the beginning. I don't want to say this, but teachers sometimes don't realize the difference” [15].

In addition to vocabularies and the lack of U.S cultural background knowledge, Chinese international students in particular expressed that “the English training they received in China often was designed to enable them to pass the standardized test like the TOEFL or the GRE”, the widely required exams for application to undergraduate as well as graduate programs in American higher education institutions [7]. For international applicants in recent years, a minimum TOEFL score of 90 is required by many colleges in the U.S. Therefore, not only the teachers and parents, but also the students themselves in China simply focused on earning higher test scores without pay attention to increase the background knowledge of the native culture. According to the literature, this model of language training and learning however, “often failed to adequately help them meet the academic demands of their programs and rarely prepared them for the subtleties of social interaction” [7]. Overall, for the sake of vocabulary, limited knowledge of American culture, and insufficient English training, language barrier became the major academic challenge for Chinese students in U.S higher education.

2.2 Critical thinking skills

For the past few years, it is worthy of attention that “western nations' educational systems have increasingly essentialized critical thinking abilities” of the students [16]. This paper adopted the definition of critical thinking by previous scholars, who regarded it as “a set of cognitive thinking skills” including asking questions adventurously and making skeptical judgements, being self-reflective by making decisions on what to believe, as well as being creative and innovative [17]. In American higher education, where critical thinking is the primary instructional objective and oftentimes influenced the students' academic achievements, numerous Chinese international students however denoted they had inconceivable difficulties in cultivating and presenting their critical thinking skills. Many articles suggest that “socio-cultural distinctiveness and the associated learning habits significantly affected how Chinese students learn and think during their education abroad” [16]. For example, in terms of the first aspect of critical thinking skills: asking questions adventurously and making skeptical judgements, traditional Confucian culture may negatively affect the students' abilities of critical thinking, since it highly “advocates for respecting and conforming to the teachers' authority” [16]. Chinese students also noted that they were reluctant, sometimes even afraid, to question the teachers' opinions. They were discouraged from such behaviors, as this was considered

extremely disrespectful and was likely to affect the “authoritative social image” of their teachers [16]. As the student expounded: “I would never challenge teachers’ views in classes, because teachers, as the authorities, need to be highly respected. I would feel shameful to challenge their objectives when asking questions” [16].

As for the second aspect of critical thinking, being self-reflective by making decisions on what to believe, Chinese educational mode tended to a crucial factor on account of offering seldom opportunities for the students to be self-reflective and making their own decisions during learning process. According to many Chinese students, being self-reflective on the class content may interfere with their study [17]. “China’s test-oriented learning culture requires in-class student learning from teacher instructions on test preparation and after class memorization” [16]. If the students spend time on self-reflective thinking rather than memorizing, they will end up with having limited time to prepare for the exams; or if they choose to filter useful information from the class based upon their own understanding instead of memorizing them all, they will offer incorrect answers to the exam questions related to the knowledge that are thought as unhelpful by themselves. Therefore, for the Chinese students, pursuing critical thinking during their study would be “punished with low scores on tests which value reproduction of the detailed knowledge the teacher imparted in the class” instead of the procedure of being self-reflective and critical [17].

Finally, Chinese international students also struggled hard to be creative and innovative, which again indicates their limited capabilities of critical thinking. Admittedly, in contrast to the significant emphasis on students’ creation and innovation of the learning environment in American higher education, China’s test-oriented instruction mode inevitably demands students for focusing on earning higher exam scores without devising their own ideas [16]. It is further clarified by a study that as passive learners, Chinese students are “hardworking and assessment-centered students who prefer well-defined and unique model answer in any assessment task contributing to the final grade” without having any insightful thoughts or innovative analysis. Many Chinese international students stated that “given the test culture in China, the former teachers narrowly focused on students’ test scores and always transmitted standardized answers for us to memorize” [16]. Because they are adapted to such a passive educational and learning model, Chinese international students experienced and are still experiencing the hardship of thinking critically and creatively in the U.S colleges [16]. In this context, it is not difficult to imagine that for Chinese learners studying in the U.S higher education institutions, adapting with the academic challenges in terms of being critical and innovative would be onerous.

2.3 In-class participation

In this paper, in-class participations are defined as any interactive activities that take place in a course setting, including discussions, games, lectures, debates, presentations, etc. According to previous studies, “engaging classroom facilitate meeting class objectives and goals while fostering an interactive learning environment for students” [18]. For the international student community, participating in the classroom activities can help them adapt more quickly to the American educational environment and teaching model, which is crucial to their future academic success at U.S. colleges. Although participation in classroom activities is generally recognized as important to the students’ academic performance, it is found that “non-native English-speaking Asian students, especially Chinese students, are reluctant to communicate orally” [19]. The low-level engagement in the classroom activities makes Chinese international students often passive during the course and difficult to make strong connections with what they are learning or to think deeply. In terms of the intensive study about Chinese international students’ silence in American classrooms, many researchers tended to consider this phenomenon “as the result of the students’ lacking communicative competence” [20]. For instance, the high level of stress of international students from China studying in U.S colleges was particularly linked to the difficulties of expressing their thoughts, participating in discussions, or answering questions fluently in English [18]. In addition to the explicit reasons like

the lack of English communication skills, some implicit factors seem to have a similar or even greater impact on the negative participation of Chinese students in American classes.

First, “pedagogical differences between the two educational systems” acted as a significant element for Chinese international students’ original disfavor of in-class activities and discussions [20]. The student-centered American classroom “values spontaneity and input from every student, not just the professor; students are also expected to contribute to class discussions and all other in-class activities” [21]. This model of tutoring contrasts with the teacher-centered Chinese classroom “where the instructor presents the material to the students in one-way communication”, offering the students few opportunities to contribute to the class [21]. One student in the study referred the Chinese classrooms as “spoon-feeding when the instructors tell the students exactly what to do, such as when to take notes, and forces them to memorize information” [18]. Hence, when being exposed to in-class activities in the U.S colleges, Chinese students usually confronted restraints coming of their forepassed academic background in China. For instance, the Chinese student claimed that she didn’t like group discussion in class and didn’t understand the purpose of doing so. She further claimed that “I was interested in the instructor’s lecture rather than other students’ ideas” [20]. In fact, this student’s tendency not to participate or not to be interested in the content of her classmates’ classroom discussions is the strongest evidence that she is undergoing a “pedagogical culture shock” [20].

Furthermore, numerous Chinese students also mentioned that sharing indigenous knowledge and experience with different socio-cultural backgrounds may adversely affect the class’s progress and interactions [22]. First, sharing examples from their past experience in China would not be easy for other students in the class to understand. Then, it would “waste the class time to explain the context and background information of the examples” [23]. For instance, one Chinese student described the following: “it would be inappropriate to share examples from China because we have different cultures, ideas, and ethical standards, and if I bring this up in a huge class, it will cause a huge discussion and it’s impolite to do this during the class” [18]. Second, according to the personal experience of Chinese students in the U.S, the instructors and other students in the classroom were less interested in their examples from China because of cultural unfamiliarity. For the students who have shared occurrences from China when taking the course, masses of them argued that “it was either during a class with international focus or when the professor had international experience, and he or she was strongly interested in their perspectives” [18]. Otherwise, it was difficult for Chinese international students to make other people in the class feel interested when sharing experiences from China.

2.4 Teamwork and cooperation

In this paper, the essence of teamwork is that teams share common goals, which they work on together keeping a certain degree of independence; team members’ roles can be either clearly defined and designated in the beginning or evolve over time yielding informal positions [24]. The empirical research suggests that team-based learning has the ability to significantly enhance student learning, the benefits of which include higher academic achievement, better long-term retention of what is learned, enhanced ability to transfer learning from one situation to another, and a more positive attitude toward the academic subject being studied [25]. In the U.S, many college and university faculties have students work in cooperative groups and assign team projects in their courses [25]. However, teamwork seemed to be a great challenge for Chinese students studying in the U.S higher learning institutions.

First, it was indicated that domestic students tended to exclude Chinese students when forming teams because most of them have “little to no interest in getting to know Chinese international students” [26]. Although they desired to be grouped with American students, Chinese students usually “felt that there was a rift or divide” between themselves and domestic students [26]. For example, one of the Chinese students stated the following: “it is really divided by the race line... Native speakers are grouped together. I guess they just like people who look like themselves” [26]. For most of the Chinese international students, when they had to have teamwork or group projects, almost

everyone in the group was from China. As a result, Chinese students faced great difficulties and even frustration in teamwork and cooperative learning in American colleges.

Dealing with the team conflict brought by domestic students' unequal attitudes and negative stereotypes towards Chinese students would be a challenge as well. Many Chinese students claimed that "they had experienced some of their American domestic peers positioning themselves with superior or prevailed attitudes" [26]. A study also suggested the situation that "multiple Chinese students have reported they were not being taken seriously by some of their American peers in team discussions" [26]. Additionally, on numerous occasions, some international students from China would be asked "curiosity questions" by their American classmates, "often consisting of overly exaggerated preconceptions and stereotypes of China that are frequently expressed by the U.S. media and/or news" [26]. It is found that many Chinese students were daunted by that sort of questions as the "inquirers seemed to be spreading misinformation as if it were factual" [26]. For example, one of the students said "what made me feel uncomfortable is that I found out they have certain stereotypes; that what I share surprised them. I do feel that Americans sometimes hold a more negative image or perception of China" [26]. Especially when it comes to the questions about politics or the nation, these sensitive topics make Chinese international students have no idea about how to answer it properly. In this case, it is likely for Chinese students to be reluctant to group with native students so as to avoid something un-pleasant.

Finally, a previous comparison study suggested that "U.S. college students are more inclined toward cooperation, whereas their Chinese counterparts rely more on competition" [11]. Indeed, the highly competitive educational system and classroom environment of China make Chinese students have a strong desire of pursuing high individual achievement in college education. For instance, the GPA of high school can be evocative of the impact which different education systems will have on the students' achievement incentives in advanced education [11]. In the U.S, "a mediocre GPA does not constitute a barrier to college admission for the students, while the low grades are equal to a closed door to formal higher education for Chinese students" [11]. The study also supported that "Chinese college students' higher self-evaluation of academic ability was associated with less willingness to cooperate in teamwork, indicating that those who evaluated themselves more highly in academic ability tended to have higher confidence in their own ability to succeed through individual effort" [11]. The long-term experience of building competitive relationship with their classmates and making achievement with individual effort therefore prevented Chinese international students from effective and active cooperation in U.S college teamwork.

2.5 New academic expectations and goals

Chinese culture has gained worldwide recognition for its young people's pursuit of academic achievement [7]. According to some articles, "traditional Chinese culture places well-educated scholars in the highest social rank, and the academic achievement of an individual will also be considered as an incredible honor to the entire family" [7]. Hence, for Chinese students studying abroad, putting scholarships into the first place is not only a personal goal, but also a cultural one [7]. The cultural demanding and high expectation for excellence in American higher education however brings Chinese students' remarkable anxieties in understanding new educational expectations and academic goals.

First, it has been pointed out that "succeeding academically was overwhelmingly identified as the greatest concern and the primary goal of Chinese international students in American colleges" [7]. In addition to high expectation from parents, another constantly mentioned momentum of Chinese international students' diligence were "good grades bring the strongest feeling of self-esteem and self-worth", and "education is the only hope for social acceptance in the U.S" [7]. However, it turns out due to their own dedication to academic excellence, Chinese international students were "socially isolated and had few other interests and recreations" [7]. In fact, a good grade neither regarded as the only way of pursuing self-esteem nor as the most important academic expectation for the domestic students in U.S institutions of higher learning. In many cases, the instructors would explicitly claim

that they never regarded test scores as an important criterion of excellence, or a measure of a student's comprehensive ability. For example, instead of grades, many professors are more interested in students' comprehensive abilities, such as practical application. In contrast, for Chinese international students, low test scores represent failure in a course. A student commented that “it not only brings disgrace to the person concerned but also to the family and to some extent their ethnic group” [7]. According to the student, he is “overly concerned with the academic performance” and “if he is accidentally unable to get an ‘A’ in a quiz or a test, he will feel overstressed, frustrated, depressed, like it is the end of the world” [7]. Besides, attaining an advanced degree is a prime method for them to achieve higher social status in China, or to realize their future goals in the U.S, “the potential negative consequences of academic failure are considerable” [7]. Therefore, the extreme stress and anxiety brought by the constant pressure from their culture to do well in school make Chinese international students struggled in understanding new academic expectation in the U.S.

On top of that, another stressor that many Chinese international students have in common about understanding American academic expectations and educational goals were self-governance and self-restraining. According to the previous researchers, “since Chinese students are accustomed to being given strict direction and rigorous discipline in their studies, university education in America definitely presents problems for them” [7]. Just as what a Chinese student have expressed that everything was stipulated crystal clear in China and there are usually strict requirements and discipline [7]. Nevertheless, compared with the situation in American universities, the explicit demands in detail and strict discipline in the class that Chinese students are used to are uncommon. To be more specific, “it was not very clear what a student exactly needed to do or how to proceed step by step to achieve the academic goals” [7]. For example, when conversing with programmed advisors about “what my academic future would be”, or “how long will I take to complete this doctoral program”, the common replies to these questions are “it is up to you”, or “it depends on you”. This is because for the educational system in the U.S, strict discipline is devalued and the students’ self-directedness is encouraged [7]. The tremendous difference between these two educational philosophies makes it difficult for international students from China to adapt to the “highly decentralized and autonomous nature of American higher education” [7]. For Chinese international students who have registered in the U.S colleges need to manage their academic work individually and identify their own academic or career goals in the future. Therefore, “such challenges accordingly bring a sense of being overwhelmed, because they were trained to totally rely on external guidance and discipline for almost 20 years before coming to the United States” [7]. The majority of Chinese students studying in the U.S stated that they “have wandered around aimlessly without any goal or direction, especially in the first year, and often felt overwhelmed and stressed because there were so many choices for them” [7]. Overall, college students from China were unable to understand the academic expectations or goals in U.S campus when offered with unclear answers or instructions, which makes them feel challenging in U.S colleges.

3. Conclusion

As pursuing higher education and academic careers in the United States continuously being an irresistible trend of Chinese society, there have been ongoing attentions to the major academic challenges of Chinese students in acclimatization on the different educational system and teaching philosophies. This article offers an extensive analysis of the five major academic predicaments that the international students from China have faced when receiving higher education in the U.S, which are language barriers, critical thinking skills, in-class participation, teamwork and cooperation, and new academic expectations. The literature offers support for the statement that Chinese international students are suffering from tremendous stress in attending American colleges. The discussion and analysis of the five academic challenges offers possible explanations for the struggled feeling that Chinese international students would possibly experience in adjustments with new educational environment and classroom management styles. Furthermore, through the detailed description of the

students' stress and anxiety, which brought by the Chinese traditional culture and their previous learning experience in China, the article may offer the domestic university instructors, the faculties of international students' center, and the advisors working at the college counseling centers, a more precise idea of the possible academic problems that the international students from China are likely to encounter during their study in the U.S.

Understanding Chinese students' difficulties and the possible reasons behind the problems, American institutions of higher learning are able to provide useful strategies and particle policies accordingly to help Chinese students overcome the challenges successfully and make the adjustment in a new educational environment. In fact, as what the article have pointed out, the five academic challenges mainly come from students' inadaptation with American educational system and classroom management styles. For example, in American colleges, academic reading is an essential part, especially for non-science majors. A number of articles and other reading materials would be assigned to students as course preparation before lectures. For Chinese international students, however, they would struggle with reading the articles filled with unfamiliar words. For some of the issues discussed earlier in this paper such as language barriers or in-class participations, the detailed description may offer insight on the instructors' side about the design of course curriculums and in-class activities, which should take into account the special background and academic needs of Chinese students to provide more effective help and guidance, so that students can better adapt to the U.S colleagues' educational environment and instruction mode. In terms of the issue of language barriers, some scholars have pointed out that when helping Chinese international students improve their English proficiency, college faculties need to realize that having the same standard pronunciation as the domestic students will seldom be accomplished through practicing. Hence, the instructors may explicitly indicate that accented and imperfect English of international students is acceptable and understood. This may encourage Chinese international students to be more active in communicating in English and attending class discussions. In this way, Chinese international students will feel more confident in pursuing their future academic path in U.S higher educational institutions.

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